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Against Germany

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GISELLA & JUDITH

Against all Odds

A mother & daughter's heroic survival of the Holocaust



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CHAPTER ONE

It was the summer of '69! I was twenty-one years old and on my greatest adventure – a four-month spree in Europe – unsupervised and free, just having completed my second year of university. One of obligations during this trip was to visit an aunt in Hungary whom I had never met before. She lived in Kisvarda, a village near the then Soviet border, today the Ukraine border. Hungary then was beautiful and safe for a young female to travel unchaperoned throughout the country. This greatest adventure also unveiled the most significant revelation in my life.

Although I knew that my family and I were Hungarian Jews, I had little actual knowledge of my parents' history in Europe. In fact, I only discovered that my sister Judith and I were half sisters when I was 13 years old because of my disruptive behaviour in grade 8 at Humewood Public School in Toronto. I had convinced myself that I was adopted because both my sister and mother were blond and my father was bald, therefore I obviously could not appreciate that he had had black hair at one time. I of course had black hair and by grade 8 we had learned the basics of Mendel's theory of genetics based on his famous pea experiment. So, it was quite obvious to me that I had been adopted and I expressed my anxiety at school, confiding in the school secretary who was also our baseball team coach. I was the shortstop and our team suffered from my distress. The school called my mother to inquire if in fact I had been adopted and to report my unacceptable behaviour. My mother simply told me to call Judith and ask her about "Lowy", which is exactly what I did. When I asked my sister about this "Lowy", there was at first a stunned silence and then she asked to speak to "Anyu" (mother in Hungarian). I imagine they both conferred and decided it was time for me to learn that my father was not my sister's father. Judith's father, Miklos Lowy had been killed in the war. The Holocaust was not common knowledge, nor taught in schools in 1961, so that was the extent of my understanding.

That summer of '69 my Aunt Anna took me to Satoraljaujhely, my birthplace at the then Czech (now Slovak) Hungarian border. On the other side of the bridge of some 100 metres is Slovenske Nove Mesto, the Czech village. The two villages are actually one town separated by the border, much like Ottawa and Hull. As much as we tried to convince the Czech border guards, we could not cross the border to the Czech side,

although I really did want to see my parents' house, which had also been my home for the first 6 months of my life. We did not have visitor visas, so my elderly aunt and I stood there gazing across the little stream, and then she started to reminisce aloud to me. "Twenty-one years ago I stood here waiting for your mother, Gisella." And at the age of twenty-one I learned the truth about the Holocaust and my family's history.

1948 - SATORALJAUJHELY, Hungary

On an overcast November morning in 1948, Anna watched as her sister, Gisella, walked across the bridge pushing her baby daughter Julia in a carriage across the bridge. The bitter wind blew Gisella's blonde wavy hair as the cold drizzle mingled with the tears that streamed down her classically beautiful face. One could only guess at the thoughts that were going through her mind as she crossed the bridge. Perhaps she was reliving the horrors of the last ten years of her life or reminiscing about her serene happy life with Miklos before the war. Miklos, her first husband, was confirmed dead. Someone had seen him go in with one of the last groups to be exterminated in the infamous gas chambers at Auschwitz. She had lived through the terror of the cattle train journey, internment at Ravensbruck and slave labour for Siemens.

Now, nearly 5 years later, she was crossing this bridge for the last time. Although this bridge was only 100 metres long, it divided the community of 20,000 people into Satoraljaújhely ("new place under a tent") in Hungary and Slovenske Nove Mesto in Czechoslovakia. Both names mean "a new place". For Gisella, it had meant a new life, a transition from the tragic past to a promising new future.

She had crossed that border hundreds of times since she had settled with her second husband, Arpad, in Nove Mesto after the war. Border guards on both sides knew this beautiful blond Jewess and let her pass undisturbed. From Czechoslovakia, she successfully ran her import/export business and smuggled people and goods across this border. She and Arpad regularly bribed the guards who were more than happy to turn a blind eye to their subterfuge activities. They had smuggled many refugees and displaced people (DPs) across this border. Arpad knew these soldiers of the occupying Soviet forces to whom he owed his life for having saved him from the Nazis. Now they played cards and drank vodka together, enjoying a unique camaraderie.

Gisella had survived the war with her daughter Judith. After spending almost two years in Sweden, in a rehabilitation camp and then as immigrants, they returned to Czechoslovakia to look for Miklos. Gisella's friend from the concentration camp, Olga, had also survived with her daughter and had gone to Sweden with Gisella and Judith. Miraculously, Olga's husband had survived Auschwitz and found his family in Sweden. This reunion convinced Judith that her father too, might have survived. So she insisted

that she and her mother return to Czechoslovakia to look for her father. So they returned, only to learn that Miklos had perished in the gas chambers. Gisella reclaimed her late parents' house and vineyards in Sarospatak, Hungary, about an hour's drive from the Czech border. Her two sisters, Livia and Anna, had survived Auschwitz and had been liberated from Bergen Belsen by the British in the summer of 1945. They too had gone to a rehabilitation camp in Sweden where they had reunited with Gisella. The three blond-haired sisters, Gisella, Anna and Livia, had survived of the original six Trattner girls. Widowed by the war, and reunited in Sweden, the three surviving Trattner sisters had decided to stay in Sweden. Anna and Livia would work and Gisella, Judith's mother, would be the homemaker. At least that had been the arrangement until Judith became obsessed with the idea of returning to Czechoslovakia to find her father. Eventually Anna and Livia also returned to Hungary and together with Gisella, they revived the wine production, pouring most of the profits from Gisella and Arpad's smuggling operations into renovating and recultivating the neglected lands and buildings of the family Trattner estate in Hungary. They had rebuilt their shattered lives, Judith was attending a "gymnasium" (secondary school) in a nearby city and they had amassed considerable wealth. Julia was born in May 1948.

But now all was in upheaval again. On February 28, 1948, a communist coup ended the democratic socialist-communist coalition in Czechoslovakia under Jan Masaryk. It was now November 1948. Judith and Arpad were in Budapest, waiting for Gisella, and their baby, Julia. Arpad had arranged to obtain their passports with the treasured Canadian visas. Gisella knew that that she would never cross this bridge again to return to her home in Czechoslovakia. She gazed lovingly at her infant daughter, as she paused on the bridge. This was another miracle. Two Holocaust survivors, both in their forties had conceived new life and would soon embark on a new life in Canada. I was the new life, born after the Holocaust, unblemished by its horrors. Although I was born in post war Hungary, I was only 6 months old when I arrived in Canada, so effectively I am not a hyphenated Canadian. Yet my life was profoundly affected by the impact the Holocaust had on my parents.

Although I did return to Hungary again in 1984 with my oldest daughter Tamara, it was in the summer of 1998 that I had a momentous visit with my Aunt Anna, who by

then was a widow. My Aunt Livia in Toronto had died that same winter and Anna was devastated that she, the second eldest, with no children, was the sole survivor of the six sisters. After all, Livia, 12 years younger than Anna, had been the baby of the Trattner family and my aunt Anna could not reconcile herself to Livia's death. During my weeklong visit with her, she spent hours recounting the history of our family. Amazingly, she had kept all the historical documents, deeds, and correspondence tracing the land transfers, the confiscation of land and home by the Hungarian government under the Jewish law, in addition to paperwork pertaining to business transactions, and various legal documents. These she gave to me for safekeeping. I took notes and videotaped her stories. I shared with her the many stories "Anyu" (mother in Hungarian) had told me about her life in Europe and Anyu and Judith's horror during the Holocaust. We also talked at length about Livia and I related to Anna the anecdotes Livia had recounted to about the Trattner family.

This is my family history based on my aunts' and mother's cumulative reflections.



CHAPTER TWO - GISELLA

Gisella Trattner, the eldest of 6 sisters, was born July 7, 1907 in Sarospatak, a small village in the then Austrian Hungarian empire. *She was my mother.* Gisella, Anna and the youngest sister, Livia were blond while the three middle sisters were brunettes. Their hometown, Sarospatak means, "muddy creek" and is situated on the Bodrog River in northeastern Hungary. Of a population of about 11,000 people, approximately 1,000 were Jewish before World War II. The families then were quite large. Gisella's mother, Blanka Dancziger, my grandmother, had 5 siblings who all lived in Sarospatak and among them had some thirty or forty children, cousins to the six Trattner sisters. These cousins would roam from family house to house and, in the summer, go swimming at the Jewish Beach in the Bodrog River. There was matter of fact segregation, the occasional pogrom, but the young cousins enjoyed life within the strict confines of religious Jewish

upbringing. My late Aunt Livia told me that before the war, their lives had been carefree and wonderful. Livia would often speak to me about her childhood, reminiscing about her happy childhood in the late 1920's and 30's with her numerous cousins, aunts and uncles. Gisella, the eldest was 15 years older than Livia and was married by 1930. Judith was born in 1933 and during her frequent visits to her grandmother often tagged along with Livia.

I lived with my Aunt Livia in Toronto for a year in 1992 commuting home to Ottawa on weekends. We would take walks together in the evening and she would often talk of her and my mother's experiences. After my mother and father passed away in 1985, Livia insisted that she was now my surrogate mother. She would talk of their happy childhood to me for hours. She transported me into another world, the European Shtetel and I tried to visualize the village as it was then. Muddy narrow streets, no cars and gangs of young children roaming around from one aunt's home to another's. It did sound idyllic when she described her childhood and Livia seemed to be transported back into her childhood when she narrated her experiences growing up in the 'Old World'. But I could not fathom the nature of the old world extended family, which of course was not my experience growing up in Toronto in the 1950's and 60's. My family consisted of my married sister and her children and Livia and her children. But we lived miles apart and visited each other by car occasionally. The only roaming I did was with local friends in the back alley behind Vaughan Road. But how I enjoyed listening to my aunt's reminiscences about the pre-Holocaust world and my mother's youth. I never knew my mother as a young woman, only as an older overweight frantic mother.

CHAPTER THREE - THE TRATTNER FAMILY

In 1909, Gisella's father, Martin Trattner, my grandfather, rented a store in the market in Sarospotok to set up a business. In 1914, Martin, acutely aware of the rising anti-Semitism and worried about his family, prepared to go to the United States. He had all the necessary documents and travelled to Fiume (Rijeka) on the coast of the Adriatic Sea. Upon seeing the vast sea before him he became frightened, tore up his documents and returned home. In 1917 Samuel Dansciger, Gisella's maternal grandfather, two of his sons, Gisella's father and one of her uncles, purchased 90 "Katasztralis hold" (1 K. hold = approximately 1.4 acres) of land, 70 of which were vineyards, from a bankrupt aristocrat in the Tokayi region of Hungary. There was one hill and the fields were fenced off with naturally thorned hedges. Each "K. hold" of land was used for growing a different variety of grapes, either for wine production or for eating. There was a family home for the manager, a workers' house, a wine house and cellar, and a press house where the water pumps crushed the grapes. They also had orchards. The property was then divided three ways and sold in 1927. Gisella's parents then purchased 17 "K. hold" of vineyards in Sarospotak, where they had purchased a new family home in 1924. The Trattners developed and expanded their wine production. Ironically, the local Catholic Church purchased their holy wine from them.

Although the Trattner family was religious, and there were six daughters, Martin Trattner believed that his daughters should be as competent in business as sons traditionally were. He assured that his daughters were well trained and educated, both domestically and in business. As the eldest, Gisella was the most skilled in the vintner and dry goods store business. But, she was nevertheless an excellent homemaker, baker, cook and seamstress. Anna explained that her father had been exceptionally modern and so ahead of his time in his attitude towards raising daughters. He was very liberated, astute in business and exceptionally learned in the Talmud.

Sometime in the late 20's my mother fell in love with a local Jewish boy; it was a love match, but since the fathers could not agree upon a dowry, they could not marry. My mother spoke whimsically of this time in her life. In 1930, her father became very ill and desperately wanted to see his eldest daughter, Gisella betrothed. My mother and Livia

both told me that their father must have had stomach cancer or very advanced gastric ulcers. Of course, at that time in that village, medical knowledge was still in its infancy. But to appease her father, my mother accepted a marriage proposal from her cousin, Miklos Lowy. He loved her, she appreciated him so they became engaged and Martin was relieved. Marriage between cousins was not uncommon in Europe at that time.

In the 1930's dowries, especially in religious Jewish families, were the tradition and the average dowry per daughter was about 1,000 pengos (Hungarian currency). However, in 1930, the Trattner family could not sell their wine since there was no transit for it. So Martin mortgaged his land to raise the dowry money. But Miklos adored my mother, had married her for love and so returned the money to the family after their marriage in 1931.

Martin died in 1932 and Gisella's mother, Blanka Trattner, was left alone to run the family businesses, and to marry off her five remaining daughters. Blanka was an exceptionally astute business woman. She had run the vineyards and dry goods store while Martin traveled extensively on business. Moreover, the older Trattner girls were competent in running a household and a business, so they were able to cope.

After their marriage in 1931, Gisella and Miklos had moved to Nagymihaj, Czechoslovakia, where Miklos set up a dental practice that was managed and promoted by his shrewd wife. Gisella would go to the market several times a week, and when engaging in business or small talk she always managed to evince smiles and laughs from all. She would then comment on the state of their teeth and invite them to visit her husband. The dental practice flourished. On December 26, 1933 their daughter Judith was born.

Theirs was a happy and prosperous life. My mother said that she and Miklos had dreams of educating Judith to become a dentist and having more children. This period of their lives was short lived as 1938 changed their world and history; Britain and France sacrificed Czechoslovakia to Nazi Germany.

In Hungary, the vineyards, wine cellar and wine house and the Trattner estate were confiscated by the Hungarian government and ownership transferred without compensation to the State on July 14 1942 as per the Jewish Laws that forbade Jews to own land. This transfer was duly noted on the "Birtoklap" or property descriptions of the

various parcels of land owned by the family. A June 8th 1943 letter from the Minister of Agriculture in Budapest confirms this transfer and offers my grandmother, "Trattner Martonne" the option of a lease back. Furthermore she is instructed to maintain the property, operate the business as before and *to continue to pay the property taxes.* My grandmother accepted the State's offer of a lease back June 18th 1943 in a registered letter.

After the war, Gisella and her surviving sisters reclaimed the property on July 4 1947. An entry on the "Birtoklap" (deed, history of the property) dated March 28, 1949 lists Vondra Janosne,/elobb (previously) Lowy Miklosne/Trattner Gisella, (my mother) and her two surviving sisters (my late Aunts Anna and Livia)as the surviving rightful owners. This land was later confiscated by the Hungarian communist regime, sometime in the 1950's. Sometime in the 1990's my aunts, Livia in Toronto and Anna, still in Kisvarda, successfully made a claim for compensation for their confiscated property. My sister Judith and I had signed over our portion to my Aunt Anna. My Aunt Anna and her husband Karoly, continued to own their home and land in Kisvarda until her recent death in January 2001.

Teljes másolat:
Kivonatol

Telekkönyvi betét.
Teleknyvjegyzéknyv.

5514

szám.

A) Birtoklap.

Lányvatah

5

Sorszám	Helyrajzi szám	A birtokrészletek külső ismertető jelei és jogi minősége	Térmeték: 1600 □-öles kat. holdakban		JEGYZET
			hold	□-öl	
1	12447	+ Rivore az Rlvóhustai utcaában	-	4	
1-7		B. Tulajdoni lap.			
		Megmunk. kételek			
		Érh. 1932. aug. 23-án 5867 n.			
		R. vármegyei járáshivatalnak Ph. 557/1932. sz.			
		hagyatékhatás végzése alapján a tulajdonjog az			
		R + 1000. ingatlannal 3/36-od részre egyenlő arány-			
		ban			
8		Löwi Miklós né. Trattner Gizella			
9		Trattner Anna			
10-12		Megmunk. kételek			
13		Trattner Lidia Danziger Péter né. javára			
		bekebelezeték			
14-20		Megmunk. kételek			
		Érh. 1942. július 14-én 2646.			
		Rz R + 1000. ingatlantól a bejegyzéskor			
		tulajdonos: Wölfl. Helga, Gál Mária és Gál Wölfl.			
		Helga illetékeire az átengedési költségekhez fel-			
21		jegyzetelték.			
22		Megmunk. kételek			
		Érh. 1948. december 30-án 3169 n. a.			
		kifelár 2000 ft.			
		Rz 1948. december 9-én és 22-én helyi adószaki			
		tervezés alapján a tulajdonjog az R + 1000			
		ingatlannal 24/36-od részre			
23		Vörhegyi Ferenc vármegyei lakos javára			
		bekebelezeték			

title search – confiscation of Trattner property July 14, 1942

ORSZÁGOS FÖLDHITELINTÉZET
BUDAPEST
V. GRÓF TELEKI PÁL-U. 7.
TELEFON: 186-976.
SÜRGÖNYCIM: RURA

G/416.Ü.
Kérjük, hogy válaszában a fenti
jelzésre hivatkozzák.

Budapest, 1943. június 8.

T.

Trattner Mártonné
sz. Dancziger Blanka és Tsei.

Sárospatak.

Zemplén vm.

Értesítjük, hogy a m.kir. Földművelésügyi Miniszter Ur
218.152/1942.VII.A.2. sz. véghatározatával Önt arra kötelezte, hogy
Sárospatak község területén fekvő és azokkal gazdasági-
lag összefüggő ingatlanait tulajdonul engedje át s egyben megbízott bennün-
ket, hogy a nevünkre kerülő ingatlanokat vegyük birtokba és hasznosítsuk.

A fentiek alapján felhívjuk, hogy a mellékelt nyilatko-
zatot kitöltve, két tanu előttelezése és keltetése után feleségével együtt
aláírva, az ott felsorolt mellékleteket csatolva, nyolc napon belül hozzánk
küldje vissza, -és ilymódon nyilatkozzék, hogy az átengedésre kötelezett in-
gatlant a folyó /1942-43/ gazdasági év végéig tőlünk haszonbérbe kíván-
ja-e venni. Egyidejűleg a csatolt csékklaupon elszámolási előlegképen utaljon
át intézetünkhöz kat.holdanként 35.-pengőt, mely összeget ajánlatának elfo-
gadása esetén a haszonbérbe be fogjuk számítani.

Amennyiben a számlálszerűen kitöltött, aláírt és mellék-
letekkel felszerelt nyilatkozat, valamint az elszámolási előleg 8 napon be-
lül hozzánk be nem érkezik, -ezt annak vesszük, hogy az ingatlanokat haszon-
bérbevenni nem kívánja, s ez esetben azoknak átvétele iránt azonnal intézked-
ni fogunk.

Egyidejűleg felhívjuk figyelmét, hogy az átengedésre köte-
lezett ingatlanokon a további gazdálkodást teljes büntetőjogi és magánjogi
felelősség terhe mellett továbbra is a legteljesebb mértékben köteles foly-
tatni.

2 drb melléklet.

dr.T./Z.B.

Of.Rot. 3.557.

Tisztelettel
ORSZÁGOS FÖLDHITELINTÉZET

CHAPTER 4 – HOLOCAUST

Judith was only 5 years old when the horrors began – “Crystallnacht” in Germany and the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia to Hitler by France and Britain in 1938. Judith’s father was an “essential” Jew, a dentist, so the family was not immediately shipped off to the concentration camps with the other Jews. Eventually Miklos had to go into hiding and one evening the Guardistas (local Nazi police) burst into their home looking for Judith’s father. Judith was only 5 years old and they threatened her with their rifles. “Where are your parents!” they screamed. Unshaken, she replied that they were dead and she was now living with her grandmother. Somehow, they managed to remain in Czechoslovakia until sometime in 1943, when Judith, just 9 years old, was sent to live with her maternal grandmother in Hungary as an “orphan.” Gisella had determined that it was no longer safe for Judith to remain in Czechoslovakia, since the vast majority of Jews had already been transported to the various concentration camps. Judith lived in hiding at her grandmother’s home in Sarospatak along with a 3 year old cousin, Ferike, the son of Gizelle’s younger sister Elsa.

Later that year, the government of Miklos Kallay under the directions of the Regent Horthy, accorded foreign Jewish children refugee status, allowing them to be adopted if they were “orphans.”

Kallay and his minister of the interior, Ferenc Keresztes-Fischer believed in an Allied victory and gave Hungary’s Jews a measure of protection unique in the continent. Under these conditions, Judith and her 3 year-old cousin, Ferike, went to Budapest to register themselves as “orphans”. They travelled alone, followed by their grandmother, who then officially “adopted” them. In the meantime, Gisella lived in hiding in Debrecen and would travel to Sarospotok to “secretly” visit Judith, that is, she would watch her daughter from a hidden vantage point while Judith walked to school or back. Gisella did not want to upset Judith or to provoke any emotional reaction that would betray both of them. The local Hungarian Guardistas would make regular raids to round up illegal Slovakian Jews in hiding, but some of these police, bribed by local Jews, would forewarn the illegal Jews of upcoming raids so they would have time to hide.

MAGYAR IZRAELITÁK PÁRTFOGO IRODÁJA
Budapest, VII., Bethlen Gábor-tér 2.

Telefon: 224-866.

Budapest, 1943. *április 18.*

Tekintetes

örm. Trattner Blanka

urnak,
urnónek,

Spirópaták

A KEOKH engedélye folytán Ön volt szíves elvállalni

Müller Ferenc

menekült gyermek eltartását. Tisztelettel közöljük, hogy a KEOKH a fent
dott engedélyt akként értelmezi, hogy Ön a gyermeket, mint szülőhely
tes saját háztartásában köteles nevelni, annak eltartásáról, ruházat
ról, egészségi állapotáról, taníttatásáról gondoskodni, reá vallási-
erkölcsi szempontból felügyelni.

Bár meg vagyunk győződve arról, hogy Ön a fentnevez
gyermekkel szemben vállalt kötelezettségét már eleve ilymódon fogta
kötelességünknek tartjuk a Hatóság fentemlitett szempontját nb. figy
mébe ajánlani és vagyunk

hittestvéri üdvözléssel:

Ajándék

Blanka Trattner

Judith's 3 year old cousin's, Ferenc Muller, official "adoption" by our grandmother, Blanka Trattner, April
18, 1943

Judith did not know of her mother's secret trips and was never aware of them until after our mother's death when I told her. She did not believe me. Our mother had recounted her war experiences to me on many occasions after my trip to Hungary in 1969 when I first learned of my mother's and sister's story.

Judith thus stayed with her grandmother in Sarospatak until March 1944 when Hitler summoned the Regent Horthy to Berlin and presented him with an ultimatum to co-operate fully or be occupied. Although Horthy agreed to the ultimatum, Hitler's army advanced* and occupied Hungary, his special SS units arresting prominent liberal and left-wing politicians and Jews, even before Horthy's train had returned to Budapest. A collaborationist government under Dome Sztojay allowed the Germans to deport Hungary's 400,000 Jews from the countryside, protected till now, to the gas chambers. The Regent was unaware of the mass deportation of Jews until June 1944. Horthy then ordered that the deportations stop but two more counties were "cleared" after the Order. Only the Jewish population of Budapest was saved with the heroic assistance of the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg and Swiss diplomat, Carl Lutz who single-handedly saved 62,000 Budapest from Nazi concentration camps. The latter's amazing rescue efforts are recounted in the book "Dangerous Diplomacy, the Story of Carl Lutz, Rescuer of 62,000 Hungarian Jews."

As soon as the Nazis invaded Hungary in March 1944, my mother hired a Slovakian peasant to smuggle Judith back to Czechoslovakia to rejoin her parents who were now hiding in a village near Bratislava. She and her parents lived in hiding together for a short while in the attic of a local Slovak family. The entire village knew that the Lowy's were hiding from the Gestapo. However, a visiting Czech national betrayed them. When they were taken away, Miklos was separated from Judith and Gisella. Judith was so horrified, she could not bear to say good-bye to her father, when he bent down to embrace his daughter for the last time, Judith just ran away from him, terrified. To this day, Judith never says good-bye or embraces anyone good-bye; she simply says, "see you later".

* Interestingly, a Hungarian acquaintance and neighbour in Ottawa, Thomas Csathy told me that his brother, Denes, was a young lieutenant serving in one of those few Hungarian units which briefly fought the Germans when they invaded Hungary.

Miklos Lowy was deported to either Auschwitz or Multhausen where he perished. All his siblings and his father survived the Holocaust, settling in the United States and Israel after the War.

RAVENSBRUCK

Judith and Gizelle were expelled to the terror of Ravensbruck concentration camp, from which very few returned alive. Ravensbruck was a women's concentration camp some 90 kilometres north of Berlin, which first began operating in 1939 and had some 2,000 prisoners. By 1942 there were 10,800 and an additional 70,000 were shipped there in 1944 as a result of the Hungarian deportations. It was in this camp that my mother not only survived, but also kept my sister, Judith, alive during their agonizing 8-month captivity from September 1944 until April 1945.

On that fateful day in September 1944, Judith and Gisella were herded into the cattle wagons of the transport train for a harrowing, terrifying trip to the camp. Gisella shoved Judith into the corner of the crowded, filthy wagon and shielded her with her body from the filth, violence and madness of that five-day trip from hell to another hell. Upon their arrival, the camp inmates carted off the corpses, and then the survivors of the train trip were lined up for the "selection". By a jerk of this thumb, the commander sent Judith to the "extermination" line. Although my mother did not fully understand the significance of the two lines, she reacted instinctively to retrieve her 11-year-old daughter. "Look at these hands" she screamed at the commander as she dragged Judith over to him. "These are the hands of a 16 year old apprentice electrician. We are both electricians and can work in your factories." He studied them and then consulted the woman commander. Judith was very mature looking and could easily pass for a 16 year-old. "What should we do with them"? Who knows what miracle prevailed upon her to look at them and spit out contemptuously, "Let the bitch have her brat!!" He then kicked Judith back to her mother. That was the first of many miracles.

After the selection, Judith and Gisella moved into the filthy, cold barracks occupied by living skeletons. Once again, Gisella acted intuitively and grabbed two upper cots, wooden planks covered with decrepit blankets. Those occupying the bottom never knew what might fall from above. The very next day, they were initiated into the camp routine with the daily dawn "appel" (row call) that would last for anywhere from one to several hours. Along with the other identified skilled workers. Judith and Gisella were tested to determine if their fine motor skills were sufficient to assemble radar equipment and aircraft components. Now it was Judith's turn to save her mother, for

Gisella's hands shook so badly, she was incapable of holding the testing equipment. Miraculously Judith passed the test for both of them. She was no apprentice electrician, merely a very brave 11 year-old whose hours of embroidery and fine needlepoint had served its ultimate purpose.

No one realized that my sister and mother were Jewish; they were both blond and had passed themselves off as Catholics. The camp commander asked them why they had been sent to this camp. Gisella continued the charade and replied, "I'm not sure, my husband is Jewish...maybe that's why." The commander found this explanation to be reasonable, so their blond hair was not shaved off, as was the case for the majority of the inmates. Having fulfilled the requirements, Judith and Gisella became slave labourers at the local Siemens factory spending endless hours assembling airplane panel instruments. Eventually, through some betrayal, their Jewish identity was revealed to the camp authorities. Conditions worsened. They were now also assigned to carry out corpses and the half dead from the medical centre, where desperate, inhuman screams revealed the gruesome nature of the experiments being conducted. Still their heads were not shaven. Judith once referred to an incredible experience she had in Canada when attending a Bar Mitzvah some time in the 60's. She actually met one of the "corpses" that she and our mother had carried out of the medical centre at Ravensbruck.

The one and only time Judith talked extensively of her wartime experience to her children, and me was at our mother's funeral in 1985 in Toronto. She described how she had given up and no longer wanted to live when they were in Ravensbruck. She could not bear the cruelty, sadism and perverse inhumanity of their captors. She just wanted to die. She grew weak and sick, but our mother remained strong and indomitable. She became even more tenacious in her determination to survive together with her daughter. She was an anguished mother, helpless and defenceless, continuously on guard against separation from her daughter. So she fastened herself to Judith to protect Judith from the murderous SS guards. It was at this time that Giselle's trembling started. She was terrified that something horrendous might befall them, and remained watchful during the night that no one take Judith away from her. My mother's hands never stopped trembling until the day she died. In the camp, she forced Judith to eat and coaxed meat and extra food from the cook who felt sorry for Judith. My mother told me that the only reason she was able to

survive Ravensbruck was because of Judith. Judith's survival was paramount to her, her sustaining drive to come out of there alive.

During their internment in Ravensbruck, Gisella had befriended a Polish Jewess, Olga, and her daughter. The two mothers helped and encouraged each other. Judith, now barely able to walk, Judith was held securely every morning between her mother and Olga during the arduous "appel". Gisella was resolute in her determination to survive and her entire being, ingenuity and courage focused on Judith and her survival. Judith slept in the cot below her mother attached by a string from her wrist to my mother's so no one could take my sister Judith away in the middle of the night. And when the sadistic bitch in charge of the barrack decided Judith was too sick and no longer useful, Gisella went directly to the camp commander who intervened on her behalf. Although my mother spoke to me many times about her Holocaust, she never explained what she said or did to save my sister. She took that secret to the grave with her, but Judith was returned to her.

By the beginning of 1945, it was evident that the Allies were winning. The Nazis bargained to liberate 500 Polish Jews from Ravensbruck in exchange for trucks from America. Arrangements were made to transfer these Jews to the Swedish Red Cross. Gisella was bidding Olga and her daughter farewell, when suddenly she had an inspiration, "We are going with you to Sweden, and we will also leave this camp. Judith cannot survive much longer!!" Olga was quite shocked! "How can you, you're not Polish!" Gisella's determination and fierce desire to save her daughter gave her the courage to attempt the impossible. She went to the gypsy who was in charge of their particular barrack, demanding to know why their names were not on the Red Cross list. She persisted, "If my husband is Polish, doesn't it mean that we are also Polish Nationals!" Summoning all her courage, she screamed at this, by now very frightened woman, "Add our names, or I will report you to the commandant" The Gypsy, herself a prisoner, was intimidated by Gisella's aggressive behaviour and commanding, cultivated voice. She promptly added their names and told them to quickly join the others. But Judith didn't want to leave, she started crying and screaming hysterically, "We're not Polish, we're not Polish, we're not allowed...!" My mother had no choice but to slap her hard and drag her out to join the others who had been herded into an outdoor enclosure that housed the insane inmates. They waited for 24 hours and during that time Judith had

become hysterical again, screaming that they had all been tricked and would now all be gassed. My mother comforted my sister, not allowing the creeping uncertainty to take over. Again, acting instinctively, she manoeuvred themselves to the edge of the enclosure near the gate, away from the raging lunatics and frenzied Poles who were starting to believe that indeed they had been selected for extermination and not liberation.

After about 24 hours the Swedish Red Cross convoy arrived, headed by its vice president, Count Folke Bernadotte, nephew of King Gustav of Sweden, accompanied by his wife, Countess Bernadotte on April 19 1945. Gisella and Judith were among the first out and avoided the hysterical stampede that followed where many were injured or trampled under foot. Gisella stared incredulously when she saw that the Count and Countess had come personally to accompany this convoy. Their presence assured the safe passage of the transport of survivors from the concentration camp throughout Nazi occupied Europe. My mother related to me how very kind the Count and his Countess were, hugging and kissing the dirty, often excrement covered survivors in front of the Nazi SS Aufseherinnen (female camp supervisors) and the male guards and commandant. Their former captors and torturers could do nothing but smile agreeably and say "Auf Wiedersehen, schone kinder" (good-bye my dears). Gisella did not yield to her overwhelming urge to spit in their faces. She was so relieved and hardly believed that they were at last really liberated.

The convoy headed out under Nazi escort. Once they were in occupied Denmark, throngs of people from the countryside flocked to see the survivors. They were crying through their smiles, blessing the survivors, and offering them all kinds of food and gifts in open defiance of the Nazi presence. Gisella was astounded to experience such kindness and affection along the entire Danish journey. Everyone wanted to touch the survivors, care for them and help in any way possible. Gisella and Judith were delirious with joy, but Gisella did not succumb to the temptation to gorge all that wonderful food nor to give in to Judith's begging and crying for it. They ate only sparingly and wisely, milk and bread. Many survivors died en route eating the wonderful rich food they had been deprived of for months or years. Their weakened digestive systems collapsed under the culinary deluge. Under Gisella's careful vigilance, they both arrived safely at their final destination, a Polish rehabilitation camp in Sweden. But they were not Polish, they

had left under false pretences and Gisella was terrified that they would be sent back to Germany.

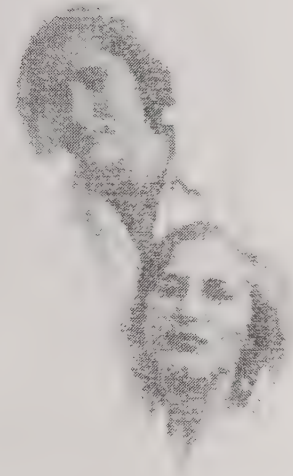
Upon their arrival at the camp, the survivors were overwhelmed by hundreds of reporters from around the world who scrambled to interview the first group of survivors from a concentration camp. Although fearful of divulging their secret, Gisella decided to confide her predicament to a Jewish reporter from America. She felt that she could trust a fellow Jew who spoke to her so reassuringly in Yiddish. He promised, guaranteed that she and Judith would be perfectly safe in Sweden and under no circumstances would be returned to Germany. All the necessary arrangements were made and Judith and Gisella were transferred to another rehabilitation camp. Their nightmare was finally over.

A few months later, the war was over and thousands of survivors came to the camps in Sweden to recover and locate surviving relatives and friends. Judith and Gisella consulted the survivors' lists every day hoping and praying that Miklos' name or any relative's name would appear.

In the meantime, Gisella's two surviving sisters, my aunts, Livia and Anna had been liberated from Bergen Belsen in the summer of 1945. They arrived in Sweden and were quarantined for 6 weeks, after which time they were taken to "Lakebrun", a royal retreat that was being used as a rehabilitation camp. Upon their arrival, they were advised that their sister was looking for them. Livia and Anna assumed it was Ibi, who had also been in Auschwitz, but in another barrack. They had always believed that Gisella, Judith and Miklos had been safely hiding in Slovakia after 1944. They then phoned the Trattner sister. Upon learning it was Gisella, they were quite disappointed since it meant that Ibi might not have survived. After a brief exchange, Gisella finally asked her sisters if they wanted to speak to Judith. There was a brief period of stunned silence on the phone line before Anna and Livia became hysterical with joy, laughing, crying and shouting. They had not dared ask my mother about my sister, Judith, for they assumed that Judith had perished, as had well over one million Jewish children. Anna and Livia were beside themselves with joy. Judith had survived! Both my aunts had described this scene for me – Anna told me that she and Livia were simultaneously laughing and crying. They were amazed that Judith had survived. But it was now clear that their three dark haired sisters and their children had been sent to the gas chambers.



Judith, unknown man, Gisella and Anna in Sweden circa 1946



My three aunts who did not survive

ARPAD WEISS (JAN VONDRA) – circa 1949



CHAPTER 5

I remember crying when my father first recounted his Holocaust experience to me. It was not until I was in my early thirties that my father first revealed his amazing story to me. I wrote a handwritten tribute to my parents, an emotional farewell and their story shortly after my mother's funeral in September 1985. But I did not attempt to sift through the historical documents, and do justice to their lives until after my visit to my Aunt Anna in Hungary in June 1998. There I recorded my aunt as she recounted the living testimony

of my mother's family dating back to the beginning of the last century. She also spoke of my father and his life for the period that she knew him after the war. And it was not until the summer of 2000 that I finally had the yellowing documents written in German translated. Now I finally understood the context of those scenes at home while I was growing up – Eckstein this, Eckstein that, letters from Germany, telephone conversations in German or Yiddish and the inevitable arguments between my parents that would follow. Even my husband's hostile reception at the German embassy in Ottawa in the late seventies, when he delivered a letter on behalf of my father, finally made sense to me. Although many Holocaust survivors received "Weidergutmachung" or compensation from the government of West Germany in the form of monthly pension payments, my father never received anything. That much I knew, but I never quite understood the significance nor the impact on my father. I do remember snippets of heated conversation between my parents regarding Mr. Eckstein, who I believe, acted on behalf of Jewish Holocaust survivors in Toronto in their negotiations with the West German government. This must have been in the early sixties. I also recall intense and often bitter telephone conversations in German or Yiddish. My father or mother would be talking to Mr. Eckstein. I really do not understand why my father was never compensated for his suffering but I do have the psychiatric reports, letters and legal documents that trace the history of his unsuccessful appeal to the German court "Oberlandesgericht". My father apparently had repeatedly tried to get compensation from the German government from 1969 onwards. On September 23, 1975, The Mainz provincial court rejected my father's claim for compensation for suffering during the Holocaust based on a report by a German psychiatrist. The German government accepted the original assessment by a German

psychiatrist, Dr. Kisker of Hanover who concluded that my father's "depression, paranoia, pathogenic, misguided attitude" probably existed prior to the war and deteriorated by 25% due to the persecution. Dr. Kisker never met my father but my father's case was "begutachtet" or reviewed by this expert witness. My father appealed and on March 2, 1977, the government of Rheinland-Pfalz sent a document confirming its position to the Superior provincial court in Kolbenz requesting that my father's appeal be denied. Its position was that Dr. Kiska's evaluation of Jan Vondra was correct in his conclusion that the appellant's mental suffering could not be attributed to his persecution during the war and therefore saw no reason to abandon his position. It further requested that if the court did not accept its position, then that the matter be referred to a higher court because of its importance in principle and in order not to set a precedent. On March 3 1977, the Superior court upheld the original decision to deny my father restitution "in spite of his obvious psycho-pathology stemming from the of persecution." (Dr. Oscar Karabanov, October 26 1976)

BEZIRKSAMT
für
Postfach 243
130026

2. März 1977

4. März 1977

MA 22 630

III/2 9-77/Es.

An das
Oberlandesgericht
8. Zivilsenat
-Entschädigungs Senat-

5400 Koblenz

Oberlandesgericht	
Kammer III	
Eing. - 3. März 1977	
Akt. Bl.	Heft

In der Entschädigungssache

Jan Vondra ./ Land Rheinland-Pfalz
- 8 U (WG) 155/76 -

Prozessbevollmächtigte: RA. Dr. Thiermann u. W. Floetz,
Lazarettstr. 35/VIII, 8 München 19

wird beantragt,

1. die Berufung des Klägers gegen das Urteil der 6. Zivilkammer -Entschädigungskammer- des Landgerichts Mainz vom 23. Sept. 1975 - 6 O (WG) 226/72 - als unbegründet kostenpflichtig zurückzuweisen,
2. im Falle des Unterliegens des beklagten Landes im Berufungsverfahren
 - a) wegen der grundsätzlichen Bedeutung der zu entscheidenden Rechtsfrage sowie zur Sicherung einer einheitlichen Rechtsprechung die Revision zuzulassen,
 - b) dem beklagten Land nachzulassen, die Zwangsvollstreckung durch Sicherheitsleistung oder Hinterlegung abzuwenden.

state government of Rheinland-Pfalz requesting that my father's appeal be denied March 2, 1977

For his appeal, my father saw a psychiatrist in Toronto, Dr. Karabanow who assessed my father's "emotional status relative to injuries suffered in persecution under the Nazi-occupation of Czechoslovakia during the last war." In his reports he describes my father as being extremely sad, restless,, anergic, paranoid, fraught with compulsive brooding or "reverberating terror" and plagued with frequent nightmares. Do I remember my father as such a man? I remember the daily arguing between my parents, the paranoia evident with the drawn blinds during his daily prayers and Friday night candle lighting. But I do not remember a "brooding, extremely sad" father. With me, and perhaps only with me and my children, he was exuberant, funny and seemed genuinely happy. He was the most wonderful father, grandfather a child could ever want. I was the sun around which his life revolved; I was the core of his very existence, his reason for living. When one talks of the unconditional love a parent has for a child, my father's love, adoration of me, epitomized this parental-child bond. But I am amazed that my father was such a wonderful father, the best in the world despite his enormous suffering and emotional baggage. There was nothing he wouldn't do for me. This was the man who squeezed two oranges every morning and brought up a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice every morning to my room as a wake up call. Even after I was married, when my husband and I would visit my parents in Toronto, my father would still come up with the orange juice. And when my parents visited us in Ottawa, the orange juice routine would not vary. When I'd be sitting in the living room in Toronto watching television he would go into the kitchen and peel and cut up my favourite apples, Spartans, which we would enjoy together. How did my father succeed in bestowing his endless unconditional love onto me while he was plagued by frequent headaches of the "bitemporo-occipital variety throbbing

in character and confusing him and not always alleviated by Frosst 222 and some tranquilisers prescribed by his family physician". (Dr. Karabanow, March 3 1977) Oh, how I wish I had known what he had suffered while he was still alive, how I wish I had been more attentive and available to my parents in their last years of life. I never truly appreciated or understood just how remarkable they were in being the most caring, loving, selfless parents in the world in spite of their horrific suffering during the Holocaust.

My father was born August 8, 1905 in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, in the town of Zsubdza, the youngest of four children. His father, my grandfather, Samuel Weiss, had gone to the United States in the 1880's and had become an American citizen. But instead of bringing over his family to the U.S., he returned to his wife in Austria-Hungary at the beginning of the 20th century. After World War I, their town became part of the newly created country of Czechoslovakia. My father attended "gymnasium" or high school, then entered a technical course, which was interrupted by a compulsory military service. After a year service, he returned to help his father run the farm and then a store. The Weiss family was part of the growing bourgeois middle class, free thinkers, where the children pretty well brought themselves up. His wife, my grandmother, Fanny, read newspapers and preoccupied herself with political discussions and other things rather than her children and home. Samuel was a successful businessman, owner of the town's dry goods store and a beautiful house and sizeable estate that his wife Fanny had brought with her as her dowry. Arpad, the youngest, was spoiled rotten and ran around with his older sister, Jolan, leading a rather unconventional life for Jews of that time. Meals would be taken at one or another aunt's home and they seemed to lead idyllic bohemian lives. Arpad was an

exceptionally handsome man and started his womanizing ways in his mid-teens. His surviving cousin, Marta, also a Holocaust survivor who lives in Toronto, often explained to me that girls and young women would just throw themselves at my father. He was carefree and irresponsible, although he did run his father's and the family homestead during his father's frequent and lengthy business trips. He was the first to own and drive a car in his village. He became very adept at car mechanics, which would serve him well in Canada, where he became a car mechanic. My father recounted to me how one time he had been left in charge of the store while his father had left for a business trip. Upon returning to the store, my grandfather found my father in a rather compromising situation with some local girl in the back room having completely neglected the store. My grandfather did not hesitate to slap my father across the face, in spite of the fact that he was in his twenties.

My father often said that life was great in Czechoslovakia between the two World Wars. It was the only democracy in Eastern Europe, the Switzerland of Eastern Europe and the government treated the Jews well. Masaryk and Benes were elected to power in 1920 and Masaryk remained the president of the state until his retirement in 1935 when he was 85. Masaryk and Benes were outstanding democrats and just leaders. Democracy flourished under a bicameral parliament elected by universal suffrage on the principle of proportional representation. More importantly, in 1920, Czechoslovakia had acceded to a minorities' treaty intended to protect minorities in the new states created after World War 1. Although Czech was the official national language, wherever a minority comprised 20% of the local population, the minority language could be used in the courts and

minority schools were provided. Only allowed threats to security could limit minority rights.

Life was beautiful until 1938, when France and England sacrificed Czechoslovakia to Nazi Germany. Arpad's older brothers, Miksa (Max) and Martin had emigrated to the U.S. in the 1920's and established their families and lives there. Arpad, his sister and parents remained behind and inevitably got caught up in the Holocaust. My father had lost his American citizenship because of his military service in the Czechoslovakian army in the 1920's.

It was a brutal shock for my father, a pampered, carefree bohemian to be thrust into the Holocaust. In 1939 my father and his parents were forced to flee Michalovce. In 1942 the Germans started the Jewish deportations. My father was taken into a labour camp and his sister Jolan, her husband Adolph and their son Laci (Larry) were deported to Hungary.

Although Larry's father, Adolph, had been an officer in the Austrian Hungarian army, this did not help the family avoid the consequences of the Holocaust. The entire family was shipped off to Auschwitz during the Hungarian deportations of 1944. Jolan and Larry survived. Larry, a young man in his twenties, was an inmate and slave laborer in Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Multhausan and was even sent to the Warsaw Ghetto with other concentration camp inmates to clean up after the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

Larry had also been a victim of unspeakable medical experiments and he bore those physical scars on his back and in his psyche for the rest of his life. His uncle, my father, became his surrogate father after the war.



Judith and Larry in Czechoslovakia circa 1948

Arpad managed to escape from the labour camp sometime in 1942. Although he never told me, in his interview with Dr. Karabanow in 1977, when he was appealing the German government's refusal to give him restitution, he revealed an incredible episode of his survival. "He (my father) cried bitterly during our session as he told me how he survived the massacre in Kamzik where other Jews were killed by machine-gun fire." [26.10.1976, report from Dr. Oscar Karabanov, translated from German by Richard Spitz] I never saw my father cry, not when his 95-year-old father died in 1965, or when his 93-year-old mother died in May 1971. His parents had come to live with us in 1960. Perhaps that is why my father never told me about the Kamzik massacre. He never cried in my presence. My father never told me about his endless struggle with the German government either for compensation. Had I only known then what I know now.

After he survived the Kamzik massacre, he kept himself hidden with his aged parents in the area of Podonice in the Tatra Mountains near the Polish border. He survived by collecting food from the farmers whom he knew in the area. He heroically looked after his elderly parents, who would have been in their fifties and sixties, often

carrying them on his back while they were hiding together in the Tatra Mountains. Eventually he managed to leave his parents disguised as peasants in a small village. While my father was hiding in the same village, a collaborator betrayed him, but just minutes before the Gestapo arrived, a sympathetic Czech partisan, Jan Vondra, came and warned my father to escape. My father was a hunted animal suffering hunger, terror, never knowing what the next day would bring. At some point, during his concealment in the mountains, he had completely lost hope. He told me that he was too tired, too terrified and had given up. When he saw the Gestapo below combing the lower reaches of the mountains, he shouted down to them waving a white handkerchief of surrender, but they did not hear or see him. Finally another Czech partisan dug him a bunker in which he hid for months. He spent the last ten days in that hellhole, terrified, hungry and desperate. He thought all was lost and he would soon die - but then he heard the Kamarooska song of the advancing Soviet forces. With his last strength, he crawled out of that hole, saw a Russian officer and kissed this officer's boot weeping in relief and gratitude.

After the war, Arpad Weiss changed his name to Jan Vondra because he no longer wanted to be so easily identified as a Jew and to honour this man who had risked his life to save a Jew. He remained pro-Soviet the rest of his life, indifferent to the evils of Stalin and the ideological war between capitalism and communism. He never ceased to be paranoid about being Jewish, even in Canada. He would draw the blinds and close the curtains before he recited his daily prayers every morning and evening and before the Sabbath candles were lit every Friday evening. He even embarked upon a campaign after his retirement to eliminate the use of the term "Jew", insisting that it had the same negative connotation as the word Negro. He advocated using the terms Israelites or Hebrews when

referring to adherents of the Jewish faith. I wrote many letters for him to various rabbis, Jewish community leaders and politicians. They never did respond to my father's innovative idea. And I never stopped supporting him in his quest.

POVERENÍCTVO VNÚTRA

Číslo: 42.281/1-VI/2-1947. V Bratislave dňa 30. dec. 1947.

Predmet: Weissz Arpád, zmena priezviska
a osobného mena.



Arpád Weissz

v Slovenskom Novom Meste.

Na základe ustanovenia l.čast. § 3. zákona č. 312/1942 Sl. z.
povoľujem zmenu Vášho doterajšieho priezviska "Weissz" na
"Vondra" a zmena Vášho osobného mena "Arpád" na "Jan".

Zmena vykonáva sa aj na Vášu manželku Gizela, rodenú Tractenberg,
narodenú 19. júna 1907 v Slovenskom Novom Meste, ktorou ste
usavreli manželstvo dňa 29. januára 1947 v Čerapece.

Súčasne robita opatrenia, aby povolená zmena bola vpravená do
všetkých matrikálnych a sponzorálnych záznamov, pokiaľ ide o
občianstvo, po prvej zmene mena a priezviska budú Vám vrátené.

Podpis:

Podpis:

Official change of name from Weiss, Arpad to Vondra, Jan - December 30 1947

CHAPTER 6

POST WAR EUROPE – ARPAD & GISELLA

After the war in 1945, Arpad and soldiers from the occupying Soviet forces at the Czech Hungarian border, became comrades and he returned to his libertine ways. His elderly parents were desperate that he marry and settle down – he was by now 40 years old and spent his days playing cards with the soldiers, womanizing and smuggling. However, one particular day in late 1946, one of the border guards came running to report to Arpad that they had intercepted a blond Jewess, a beautiful one, without the requisite papers, attempting to smuggle some goods across the Hungarian-Czech border. Arpad could always be counted on to pay money or provide contraband goods to these guards to turn a blind eye when a Jew or a friend tried to cross the border illegally. So he went down to check her out, and behold, met Gisella. Within days they established a business partnership that eventually became a permanent bond. Gisella already had several suitors who were vying for her hand in marriage, but when she met my father, she fell hard and forever for him. My father was not the marrying kind and was quite honest with her. She did not care and pursued him relentlessly with the active assistance of his parents. Finally, when she became pregnant, and Arpad realized that she could actually bear his child, he married her, but truthfully told her that he could not give up his libertine ways. She, as most women, believed that she could change him.

In post war Czechoslovakia, Gisella and Arpad worked hard to establish themselves, refusing help from JIAS (Jewish International Agency). Gisella was the driving force of their enterprise and Arpad was responsible for transporting goods across the border, looking after duties and tariffs and maintaining business contacts. There would

be no more camps for my mother. She had not survived Ravensbruck to go to another camp, not even a Jewish camp. Gisella and Arpad became rich and were well known in the border area of both countries with freedom to travel unhindered.

However, shortly thereafter, the Soviets recalled the occupying soldiers, sending in unfriendly replacements with orders to close down the border. On February 28, 1948 a communist coup ended the coalition government. Jan Masaryk, son of the former president Masaryk and foreign minister of a socialist-communist post war government of Czechoslovakia, "committed suicide" assisted by Soviet comrades who threw him out the window of the presidential palace in Prague. Democracy was ending again; the Soviet liberators were becoming the communist oppressors. It was time to emigrate. On May 10, 1948, I was born, just 4 days before the birth of the State of Israel, but they had no desire to go the Promised Land. Instead, they prepared for their flight to Canada. Shortly after the war, Arpad had helped a Canadian woman who had come to Czechoslovakia to retrace her roots. He helped her find some family records in a small village church. Grateful to my father, she offered to sponsor him and his family, should they ever decide to immigrate to Canada.

My aunt, Anna, had helped my mother prepare for their illegal flight from Czechoslovakia. All that accumulated wealth was converted to gold, crystal and other easily transportable goods. Anna recounted to me during my trip to Hungary in July 1998, how she had helped my mother hide at least 12 gold bars in goose down filled pillows and eiderdowns. All their worldly wealth, which was substantial, was packed in boxes to be sent in transit to Canada while Gisella, Arpad, Judith and I would fly from Budapest to Antwerp and then to Canada. Their goods were seized in transit according to my mother,

because someone had revealed that they were en route to Canada and not in Budapest on business. But according to Anna, she believes that the border guard whom my mother had hired to transport their goods across the border actually kept the loot himself. Suffice to say that they lost their worldly wealth.

This was the family's first flight and they experienced turbulence before arriving to Antwerp. My father told me that during this flight, he vowed that if they would be lucky enough to land safely, he would never fly again. True to his word, their airline tickets were switched for first class passage aboard the "Aquitania" that brought my family and me to Halifax in January 1949. At that time, airline tickets were considerably more expensive than even first class passage aboard a transatlantic ship. Judith told me how they were all seasick for the entire week and could not really enjoy the luxury of that passage, except for me. My father never flew again.

My parents had a tumultuous marriage, lasting 38 years until their death in Canada in 1985. They lived to briefly enjoy their two young granddaughters, my children.

After we settled in Toronto in 1949, Judith attended Vaughan Road Collegiate in grade 10. She had told me how easy (English excepted) she had found all the courses, particularly math and science. Although there were a significant proportion of Jewish students attending the Collegiate, Judith was the only immigrant. She did not and could not assimilate well with her expensive European clothing, looks and large golden earrings. She was strikingly different and the other teenagers did not accept her. When I attended the same high school in the sixties, one of my English teachers, Miss Mason, inquired if I had a sister, Judith Vondra, who had been at this school in 1949. I was shocked to discover that she still remembered Judith. Miss Mason explained how beautiful and

isolated Judith had been in the school. She had felt sorry for her and obviously had never forgotten her.

Judith was dating a local Jewish pharmacist, for although she was in her 16th year, she was not a typical adolescent. The war and the Holocaust did not permit the luxury of childhood or adolescence. Judith was mature and serious far beyond her years. However, one day in 1949, a man appeared at the door delivering the refrigerator my mother had ordered. Pista (Steve Goldfarb), then working for Caplan's Furniture, took one look at Judith and asked my mother if she would rent a room to a nice Jewish boy. He courted my sister for a year.. When he first moved in with us, my father demonstrated his usual paranoia. He was convinced that Steve was some kind of spy, especially after ordering his own phone line. But Steve played chess with Arpad, did major repairs in our house and eventually satisfied my father that he was not a threat to our family. They married in February 1950 when Judith was 16 and Steve was 30. Peter was born in 1951 and Dyan in 1956. Judith, the miracle child who survived Ravensbruck, lives happily and successfully in Toronto with Steve. They have 5 beautiful grandchildren aged 15 to 25. Gisella, the anguished defenceless, mother in Ravensbruck triumphed.



Judith and Steve on the night of their wedding – 87 Vaughan Road Toronto, February 1949

CHAPTER 7

PISTA (Steve Goldfarb)

Steve was born in Rumania in 1920. By 1940, the Holocaust had started in Rumania. Although the Germans never occupied Rumania, the Rumanians under the leadership of the Iron Cross, exterminated over 75% of their Jewish population with a bestiality and sadism unmatched in the occupied countries. Steve's family, his parents and two younger sisters, fled eastward towards the Soviet Union, from village to village, with other desperate Jewish families. At the last village in which they encamped, the elders of the Jewish families decided to send out three Jewish young men, including Steve to scout ahead their escape route. Steve's father accompanied him to the edge of the village and bid him farewell. Steve knew that he would never see his family again; he realized that they were being sent east to escape the Gestapo onslaught. In fact, his family and the other Jews were rounded up the next day and exterminated. Steve lost his parents and his two younger sisters. Steve made his way to the Soviet Union where he joined the Soviet army. He was trained in radar and the latest electrical technology of that time, which served him well in his business career in Canada. After the war, he escaped from the Soviet army and because of his fluency in six European languages, he worked for the American army in the (displaced people) DP camps throughout liberated Europe. I saw great pictures of him in his American army uniform in different European settings, always with different women. Then, through JIAS, he came to Canada, met my sister and established himself very successfully in business. Judith and Steve have 2 children and 5 grandchildren and live happily and prosperously in Toronto.

LIVIA and ANNA

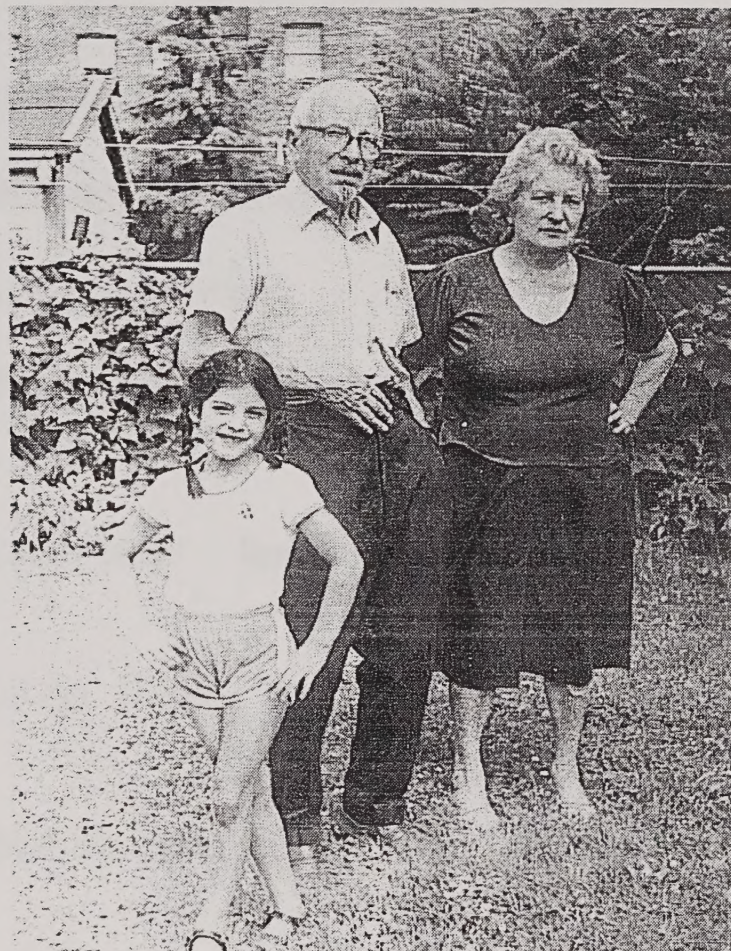
My Aunt Livia, the youngest of the original six Trattner sisters, married after the War. By 1950 she was pregnant with her first child. My parents, who were by now in Toronto, sponsored her and her second husband Bela Pollock, also a Holocaust survivor, to come to Canada. Their daughter, Scarlet was the first of the family to be born in Canada. Although Anna and her second husband, Karoly also had the requisite papers to come to Canada, Anna was too afraid to leave Hungary and lived there till her death on January 1st 2001. During my last visit to Hungary in February 2000, I asked her why she and Karoly had not come to Canada. She said that if they had had children, they definitely would have followed her sisters to Canada. As it is, she told me that their lives in Hungary had been wonderful after the war. Karoly had been a civil servant in a managerial position. They owned their house with a couple of acres of land on which they grew countless fruits and vegetables. She explained that they always had four weeks of paid vacation annually, two in the summer and two in the winter. The government sent them on all paid trips to different vacation spas, including spas Bolton Lake and magnificent villas on huge estates, formerly owned by Hungarian aristocracy prior to the World War II. Her husband died suddenly in the summer of 1984, one day after Tamara and I had visited them and he and Tamara had kicked around a soccer ball. We like to believe that his strenuous activity playing soccer with Tamara was not the catalyst of his heart attack. My Aunt Anna unsuccessfully tried to reach Tamara and me in Budapest the next day but I believe we left shortly thereafter en route to Israel where my family and I spent 6 weeks. I only learned of Karoly's death upon our return to Canada at the end of that summer. That very winter, Anna came to Canada for several months where she wintered in Toronto at her sister's Livia. My mother and father had not seen her since

1949. It was a timely visit, for Anna was still there in Toronto when my father died on April 1 1985. Anna returned to Hungary shortly thereafter to tend to her garden and home. That was also the last time she saw my mother, who died on September 21 1985. We asked Anna to remain in Canada but she said that she was too old to move to new country and that she wanted to be buried beside her husband in the Jewish cemetery in Kisvarda. Anna returned to spend several more winters with Livia, including a couple in Florida, until 1992 when I lived with Livia during my articling year. By then Livia had serious heart disease and could no longer cope with Anna's visits. Anna continued to live in Kisvarda until her death at the age of 90. Anna (Trattner) Veszi was the last of the Trattner sisters. I had visited Anna in Hungary during that fateful summer of 1969 and then again on return trips in 1984, 1998 and 2000 and of course had seen her when she spent several winters in Toronto. I see no reason to return to Hungary anymore for Anna was the last link to that country which had so viciously persecuted my family. Now the second and third generations live and flourish in Toronto and Ottawa.

Postscript

I started my journey into my family's history in the summer of '69 that I still continue today. I learned to understand why my mother was always so fiercely overprotective of me while I was growing up. It was a joke among my friends that my mother would call their place before I actually arrived there, to make sure I had arrived safely – usually no more than a five minute drive. She spent more money on long distance calls tracing my whereabouts in Europe during that incredible summer of '69 than the cost of a trip for her to fly over and simply accompany me would have cost her. Although my father remained religious and observed the Jewish traditions, my mother would not go to synagogue. She simply believed that after the horrors that she had witnessed and experienced, either there was no G-d or if indeed such a G-d did exist, she could not and would not worship an Entity that had permitted the Holocaust.

My parents called me every day of my married life. Shortly after 6 p.m., the phone would ring and we all knew it was Anyu (mother) and Apu (father). I have never stopped mourning for them or longing for those daily calls.



My parents, John and Gizella Vondra with their granddaughter Tamara Taub at 87
Vaughan Road in Toronto, November 1982

Blanka Dancziger Trattner — Martin Trattner

murdered in 1944

died in 1932

!

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Gizelle, Anna, Szibu, Elsa, Ibi, Livia - six sisters

Szibu, Elsa and Ibi, married with children, all perished in the Holocaust

Gizelle, Anna and Livia survived, widowed

Gizelle Trattner Lowy — Miklos Lowy — married 1931 — Miklos, murdered in 1945, Auschwitz

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Judith Lowy Vondra Goldfarb — Steven Goldfarb (Toronto)

!

!

Peter Goldfarb — Gail (Toronto)

Dyan Goldfarb Kirschenbaum — Howard

!

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Michael, Jodie, Jonathan

Noah, Roxanne

Gizelle Trattner Vondra — Arpad Weiss (John Vondra) (married 1946 in Czechoslovakia)

died September 21 1985

died April 1 1985 (Toronto)

!

!

Julie Vondra Taub — Hillel (Ottawa)

!

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Tamara & Nadine

